

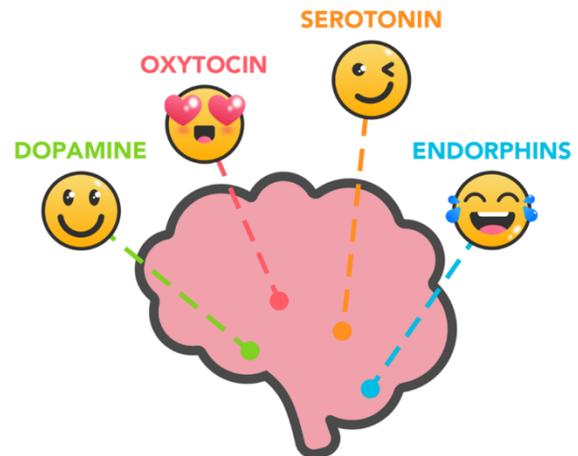
# Healing Starts With a Feeling

By Dr. Derek Conte

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Recently, when discussing the source of good health with an immunologist friend of mine, they were struck by this statement I off-handedly made: “Healing starts with a feeling”. Having studied the field of psychoneuroimmunology, we both understood how peoples’ attitudes, beliefs and moods influence their well-being: THROUGH CHEMISTRY!

When you’re feeling well, in a good mood, because something wonderful has happened, loving or feeling loved, celebrating an event, after accomplishing a task, attending an inspiring religious service, or even after exercise, your brain and body change.... chemically. “Feel-good” neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, endorphin and enkephalin are automatically released. But these chemicals are transient in the system. They do not last.



Dopamine: Involved in learning and positive reinforcement. Promotes “pursuing things that provide a good feeling; a need that is about to be met”. Dopamine shuts off when the objective is reached. (Dopamine = reward/pleasure/“excitatory”/inhibits serotonin)

Serotonin: “Turns off the pursuit of things that feel good”. Serotonin is also involved in social status and rank. When we feel our status is higher, serotonin is released and we become willing to take more risks to achieve goals. When we feel lower status, the stress hormone cortisol is released and we tend to retreat from conflict. (Serotonin = happiness/contentment/inhibits dopamine)

Discerning between “Reward/Pleasure” (i.e. the short-term) vs. “Happiness/Contentment” (i.e. the long-term) is vital and the difference must be clearly perceived by individuals.

Oxytocin: involved in “Trust” i.e. in mating behavior, love-making, childbirth, breastfeeding, nurturing, touching, grooming. Oxytocin helps animals trust and overcome their natural xenophobia, allowing them to be comfortable among their own herd and remain with them.

Endorphin: Released after intense exercise, helps mask pain, i.e. the “Runner’s High”. This is why movement can reduce pain signals. Strong laughter can do the same and help us relax.

Enkephalin: “A pain-killing, opiate-like substance that binds to the same receptors as morphine”

My work gives me this sense of well-being. More than once I’ve had patients come to me in despair because they couldn’t get the help they needed, sometimes told their pain was “psychologically-driven” and were referred to psychiatrists. But, after our assessment, when I told them there was something we could do, they welled up in tears of relief and hopefulness. Their healing, in that moment, had already begun.

These good emotional spaces boost our immune systems and our growth and healing powers are enhanced. But fear, injury, hunger, discouragement, disappointment, rejection, loss of status, insecurity, doubt and worry are stresses that promote the opposite, releasing cortisol, which can stay in the system for months, inhibiting the immune response, healing and strong health.

Doing constructive, creative, estimable things and being positively involved with others are keys to a sense of well-being, good health, and the "will to live". Without these features in our lives, we are vulnerable to illness, depression, addiction, and self-harm. Momentary pleasure is not the same as happiness and contentment. The exclusive pursuit of the former chemically precludes the latter.

Be well, be safe, and God Bless.

Sources:

1: Robert Lustig, MD of FitMind.

2: Inner Animal Institute: episodes 2 & 3 of 7.

3: <https://www.britannica.com/science/enkephalin>.

4: <https://www.mindmypeelings.com/blog/daily-dose-of-happiness-chemicals> (excellent article)

5: see other articles by Dr. Conte on Psychoneuroimmunology at: [drderekconte.com](http://drderekconte.com)

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